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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the link between language and power as it relates to program evaluation of the Brisbane School of Distance Education. This program was developed in 1989 to meet the educational needs of children who are part of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. Guild members and their families travel from town to town putting on agricultural and equestrian shows. As part of program evaluation, interviews were conducted with parents, children, home tutors, and itinerant teachers. Interpretation of interview data was affected by relationships between the Showmen's Guild and the School of Distance Education, between the Guild and the researchers, and between the School and the researchers. It was found that in each relationship, language was used in an attempt to exercise power, by way of controlling the constructed identities that represent each group to "the public." Other noteworthy factors in these relationships include difficulties establishing communication among the three groups due to the mobility of Guild members, the ambiguous status of individuals within each group, and the coinciding and competing aspirations of researchers. Based on communication theories, this paper suggests that language reinforces the power to control responses of readers or listeners, that power is differentiated and mediated through language, and that all three groups involved in the study attempted to enhance their cultural capital and thereby become less marginalized in the wider community. (LP)

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MARGINALISED IDENTITIES, COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES, AND THE POLITICS OF RESEARCH:
ISSUES IN INTERPRETING THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES OF THE CHILDREN OF THE SHOWMEN'S GUILD OF AUSTRALASIA

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Paper presented at the "Signs and Power: The Politics of Communication" seminar, Department of Communication and Media Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Central Queensland, Rockhampton, 21 September 1993.

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Since the end of 1991 several members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Central Queensland have been conducting research into a program designed by the Queensland School of Distance Education for the children of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. The research has involved two sets of semi-structured interviews with selected children, their parents, home tutors, and teachers from the School of Distance Education. Initial findings from the research have been reported in various national and international conferences, and have drawn from various theoretical and methodological frameworks.

This paper reflects on several links between language and power that have emerged from the study. Reference will be made to the following contexts in which those links are revealed: the relationships between the Showmen's Guild and the School of Distance Education, between the Guild and the researchers, and between the School and the researchers; the multiple identities of members of the Guild; the difficulties of communicating with other members of the show communities; and the development of a research culture in the University of Central Queensland.

In considering these links and contexts, the paper appeals to Derrida's notion of communication as textual citations; Foucault's studies of the connections between knowledge and power as they apply to particular social groups; and Bourdieu's work on the construction of cultural capital. The paper is provisional in two important senses: the research is continuing for at least another year; and the presenter's views are not necessarily shared by other researchers.

MARGINALISED IDENTITIES, COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES, AND THE POLITICS OF RESEARCH: ISSUES IN INTERPRETING THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES OF THE CHILDREN OF THE SHOWMEN'S GUILD OF AUSTRALASIA[1]

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to discuss three related items. The first item is an educational program instigated by members of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia for their children and operated by teachers at the School of Distance Education in Brisbane. The second item is a research project that is designed to study this program, and in which a number of staff members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Central Queensland have been involved over the past two years.

The third item is various kinds of perceived intersections between the research project and the educational program, particularly as these intersecting areas suggest links between language and power. In the process, reference will be made to selected elements of the theoretical positions of three influential contemporary thinkers: Derrida's notion of communication as textual citations; Foucault's studies of the connections between knowledge and power as they apply to particular social groups; and Bourdieu's work on the construction of cultural capital.

Finally, it is appropriate to emphasise at the outset that the discussion is provisional in at least two important senses: the research is continuing for at least another year; and the writer's views are not necessarily shared by other participants in the research project.

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[1]I am grateful for the willing co-operation of members of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia and staff members from the School of Distance Education in Brisbane. Interviews were transcribed by Mr Geoffrey Danaher, Ms Bonita Frank, and Ms Pam Gale. The project was funded by a University of Central Queensland Research Grant (ER/U/399). I thank my colleagues in the Faculty of Education at the University of Central Queensland, particularly but not exclusively fellow members of the Professional Growth Research and Teaching Group, for their diverse contributions to and interests in the project on which this paper reports. I accept responsibility for the views expressed in the paper.

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THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM[2]

There are a number of "runs" or circuits throughout Australia connected by the annual agricultural shows. In addition to the local committees, various groups are involved in organising these shows. These groups include members of the Showmen's Guild ("the showies"), "the itinerants", "the horsy people", and "the workers". Although distinctions among groups are clear to show people, interaction is strong and membership sometimes overlaps. Previously members had to be born into the Guild; now people can apply for election if they have worked on local shows for at least three years. The extent to which this has resulted in the introduction of large amounts of "new blood" remains to be established.

The lifestyles of the people involved in the show circuit resist the automatic application of the term "itinerant". Certainly some families do not own houses, instead spending large parts of each year travelling with the show on different runs. On the other hand, many show people do own houses, or else they live for extended periods with relatives in various coastal locations. Similarly, while some groups probably lack ready access to telephones and other forms of communication, several show people have mobile telephones, facsimile machines, and other technological paraphernalia. Finally, although it might be thought that being constantly on the move means that show people are poorly educated and even illiterate and innumerate, many show children attend prestigious boarding schools and some adults have university degrees. Indeed, sections of the show community operate as a well organised and articulate lobby group for dealing with "outsiders".

In 1989, largely in response to active representation to the Queensland Government by members of the Showmen's Guild, the Queensland Department of Education established a program for children connected with the show circuit. Teachers from the School of Distance Education in Brisbane oversee the children's completion of correspondence lessons, which are supplemented by various technological aids. The

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[2]Much of the information in this and the next section of the paper is taken from Danaher (1993, pp. 2-3).

teachers travel to several shows in Queensland, and work directly with the children in local schools. Some parents employ home tutors to work with their children when the teachers return to Brisbane. When the show moves out of Queensland, the children continue to work on the Queensland program, which to date has not been introduced to other Australian States.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project examining aspects of this unique learning situation is being conducted by staff members from the Faculty of Education at the University of Central Queensland. Working largely within an interpretive paradigm and using a qualitative orientation, the researchers are following the grounded theory methodology propounded by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The pilot study, carried out in July 1992 at the Mackay show, involved five researchers conducting general, semi-structured interviews with sixteen children, seven parents, and three home tutors. In June 1993, seven researchers attended the Bundaberg show and completed semi-structured interviews, focussing on curriculum, participant roles, social networks, and work and play, with twenty-eight children, sixteen parents, five home tutors, and eight teachers.

The researchers bring to the project a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and aspirations. Some identify themselves strongly with one of the major paradigms in educational research (such as empiricist, interpretive, and critical); others prefer a more eclectic approach to theory building. Some are keen to use the research to explore particular curriculum areas or other aspects of educational enquiry that are their dominant professional concerns; others are more interested in the processes than the products of the research, and see the project as an opportunity to develop research and publication skills. Although there is a core of staff members actively committed to the project, other staff members have taken a more detached role as their commitments and interests have changed. The researchers have yet to decide as a group which forms future stages of the project should take.

The presentations reporting this research have concentrated on several specific elements of the lives of the show children.[3] These elements include the background to the program (Wyer, Danaher, Woodrow, Kindt, Hallinan, Moran, Rose, Purnell, Duncum, & Thompson, 1992); links among social networks, itinerant education, and program evaluation (Danaher, Rose, & Hallinan, 1993); relationships between parents and teachers, children and teachers, and parents and children (Thompson, Wyer, Kindt, & Danaher, 1993; Wyer, Thompson, Kindt, & Danaher, 1993); work and play (Rose, 1993); the conceptualisation of itinerancy (Danaher, 1993); recreation and the construction of meaning (Rose, Danaher, & Wyer, 1993); and the constitution of a disadvantaged group (Rose, Moriarty, & Danaher, 1993). All these reports of the research have taken the form of conference papers; as the project proceeds, it is planned to submit many of these papers as prospective journal articles. A brief monograph has also been mooted.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM AND THE RESEARCH PROJECT

There are various intersections between the educational program and the research project described above. Three of these intersections are considered here: relationships and identities; communications; and research.

Relationships and identities

Three sets of relationships - between the Showmen's Guild and the School of Distance Education, between the Guild and the researchers, and between the School and the researchers - result from the intersections of the educational program and the research project. In each set, language is used in attempts to exercise power, by way of controlling the constructed identities that represent each group to "the public".

In their more altruistic forms, these motivations might be considered thus: the Guild members want a comprehensive education for their children, based on their view of

[3]Unlike these other presentations, this paper is concerned with the processes of the research project, rather than a specific set of data resulting from the project.

education as intrinsically worthwhile as well as serving utilitarian ends; staff members of the School of Distance Education want to provide an educationally worthwhile program to a group of children with particular learning needs; and the researchers want to publicise, and thereby help to ensure the continuation of, what they see as just such a worthwhile program.

In their less altruistic forms, the motivations of each group might be represented very differently. The Guild members want from the School of Distance Education a particular form of education for their children, and from the researchers some publicity about their lifestyles and their articulateness. Staff members of the School want from the Guild a justification of their continued operations and from the researchers some publicity about their innovative program and personnel. The researchers want from the Guild and the School co-operation to produce research that will enhance their individual and collective academic careers.

The point is not that each group's "real" motivations belong to the less altruistic category, while their desired portrayals belong to the more altruistic category. Instead, there is demonstrably a range of attitudes to both the program and the project within and among all three groups. At one level, the program and the project, as well as the sets of relationships described above, might be seen as helping to make the identities of these three groups less marginalised than they were previously. In other ways, however, members of the groups seek to retain distinctive features of their identities that emphasise their "difference" and that in other contexts render them marginalised.

Communications

If it is accepted that communication is at best problematic and prone to misunderstanding, and at worst the exercise of power to enforce control and in any case impossible in practice, it can be seen that communications among the three groups to whom this paper is relevant are by no means straightforward. A procedure as simple as "getting in touch with" particular group members is more difficult on closer examination. Both the Guild members and the School of Distance Education teachers are itinerant for significant parts of their working lives, and establishing their general and precise location at a given moment sometimes requires persistence. Some

of the Guild members and the teachers now have mobile telephones and facsimile machines, in recognition of this problem.

Similar difficulties attend attempts by "outsiders" to understand the often unconscious structures and nuances within the three groups. The terms "show people", "distance education teachers", and "university academics" convey little of the hierarchies at work in all three organisations. For example, "insiders" and "outsiders" would be likely to identify different individuals and roles as constituting "the bosses" and "the workers". In the same way, each group's status in the wider scheme of organisations is not always apparent. The "northern run" of the show circuit, for instance, is considered more lucrative and substantial than the "western run", while the University of Central Queensland's proclamation only two years ago means that some people fail to associate it with the former Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education.

Research

Attempts to establish a research culture at the University of Central Queensland reveal other links between language and power in the educational program and the research project. Individual staff members in the Faculty of Education feel pressure to demonstrate their capacity to conduct and disseminate research. Members of the University executive are keen to use indicators such as research funds and publications as evidence of the former institute of advanced education successfully being transformed into a university. It is drawing too long a bow to suggest that the university researchers were attracted to the project because it involved talking to people who were marginalised in similar ways to themselves, but nevertheless the apparent associations are marked.

The other two groups engage in informal research in their dealings with each other. The School of Distance Education teachers monitor the effectiveness of their teaching materials, particularly when they work face to face with the show children in local schools. Similarly, the Guild members are interested in establishing the relative merits and limitations of having their children involved in the program and sending them to boarding school.

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

In turning to three contemporary thinkers for elements of a theoretical perspective, no claim is made about being comprehensive or detailed; for example, the areas of potential contradiction among the three writers have not been considered at this juncture. Instead, the intention is to refer briefly to particular ideas that appear to illuminate aspects of the subject under review, with a view to establishing lines of communication with scholars working in related fields.

Derrida

Derrida (1988) has put forward the notion of communication as textual citations, with texts enabling multiple readings of one another (Birch, in press; Easthope, 1991, pp. 112-113). His argument that language consists of systematically arranged differences or distinctions (Thody, 1983, p. 178) reinforces the power deriving from controlling potential responses to texts by readers or listeners. This brings to mind various complaints about the readability of some of the literature produced by the School of Distance Education for use by parents and home tutors when helping the show children with their correspondence work.

Derrida's insight that the binary logic underpinning structuralism can be reversed, so that "up" can be read as "not down", and his inference that signifiers and their meanings are capable of sliding across one another (Schirato, in press), also suggest a potentially fruitful means of exploring the links between language and power in regard to the Showmen's Guild study. In other words, the same practices connected with the show circuit are "controlling" to some people and "empowering" to others, depending on the contexts in which they are discussed and the discourses that shape their interpretation.[4]

Foucault

Foucault has conducted various studies of the connections between knowledge and power in particular social groups (1979; 1980). His assertion that power assumes a

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[4]This writer acknowledges Culler's (1988, pp. viii-ix) liking for the expression "framing the sign" in preference to "context".

"capillary" form (1980, p. 39), and that it operates through everyday social practices, has implications for putative links between signs and power. Thus, power is differentiated and mediated through language. This can be seen at work in the educational program sought by the Showmen's Guild and operated by the School of Distance Education. From one perspective, this program has the potential to appropriate the schooling experiences of the show children into more conventional forms than might otherwise occur, thereby leaving unchallenged the existing education system in Queensland.

Another aspect of Foucault's work that warrants greater attention than it can receive here is his consistent interest in various incarnations of the other - the mad, the unwell, the incarcerated, the delinquent, the deviant. The difficulty in ascribing unproblematically the labels "itinerant" or "nomadic" to people involved with the show circuit reinforces the understanding that these conceptions are unstable and contextualised, rather than fixed and natural. The several ways in which show people describe themselves, and in which they are described by people who have extended contact with them, indicate that language is being used to carry out the construction, or alternatively to resist the imposition, of particular forms of identity.

Bourdieu

Bourdieu has much of interest to say about the construction of cultural capital. His contention (Bourdieu, 1984) that the aesthetic world view serves the interests of power as well as status, by emphasising differences between "us" and "them" on questions of taste, is potentially applicable to all three groups considered in this paper (although there are clearly problems with transposing an analysis of French society to elements of Australian society). For each group, involvement in both the educational program and the research project offers a means of enhancing their store of cultural capital, in the process providing opportunities to become regarded as being less marginalised in the wider community.

Bourdieu's related concept of habitus is also suggestive in this regard.

> The habitus, an objective relationship between two objectivities, enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation, the meaning of which is produced by the habitus through categories of perception and appreciation that are themselves produced by an observable social condition. (1984, p. 101)

This meeting ground of practice, history, and the individual helps to explain how, for example, members of all three groups consider themselves, and behave as if they are, simultaneously marginalised and empowered, at once individual free agents and social constructs.

CONCLUSION

The major elements of this paper are encapsulated in its main title. "Marginalised identities" might be said to refer to all three groups considered here: the Showmen's Guild, the School of Distance Education, and the Faculty of Education at the University of Central Queensland. "Communications technologies" does not suggest only the equipment used by the show children to communicate with their teachers in Brisbane, and the researchers to interview the children, their parents, their home tutors, and their teachers. It applies also to the texts, charged with meanings and infused with power, through which interactions within and among these groups take place.[5] "The politics of research" similarly brings to mind both the co-inciding and competing aspirations of the researchers, and the wider issues involved in establishing a research culture in an integrated regional university. Appeals to the theoretical input of Derrida, Foucault, and Bourdieu, among others, are intended to indicate possibly fruitful dialogue with other researchers working in related areas. In all these ways, signs and power are inextricably linked with one another, and they are also all around us.

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[5]In this regard, it might be instructive to apply to the technological elements of both the educational program and the research project Hodas' (1993, p. 1) assertions about educational technology:

> This paper proposes that technology is never neutral: that its values and practices must always either support or subvert those of the organisations into which it is placed; and that the failures of technology to alter the look-and-feel of schools more generally results from a mismatch between the values of school organisation and those embedded within the contested technology.

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